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RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA PRIORITY 2454
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 9470
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 7726
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 5462
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 3893
RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO PRIORITY 0048
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PRIORITY 0246
RUEHSM/AMEMBASSY STOCKHOLM PRIORITY 0864
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 4511
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 0031
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 7265
RUEHON/AMCONSUL TORONTO PRIORITY 0243
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 0155
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000143

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INSB

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SUBJECT: COLOMBO CHIEFS OF MISSION RECOMMEND WAYS FORWARD

REF: SECSTATE 16163

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR PATRICIA A. BUTENIS. REASONS: 1.4 (B, D)

11. (C) SUMMARY: In a meeting called by Ambassador to discuss reftel demarche to capitals, chiefs of missions (COMs) in Colombo agreed with the U.S. assessment that the political situation in Sri Lanka had deteriorated after the presidential elections in terms of the Fonseka arrest, intimidation of the media, purges in the military and police, and renewal of Emergency Regulations. They also noted new threats to NGOs and INGOs, particularly Transparency International. COMs were unsure whether the recent political crackdown was temporary or indicated a new style of leadership by the Rajapaksa regime, though it appeared the Rajapaksas were set on a more authoritarian course. COMs made several recommendations for the way ahead including:

-- Refrain from active public engagement -- especially in the press -- with the government of Sri Lanka (GSL) until after parliamentary elections April 8.

-- At the same time, we should be prepared to hit the GSL hard privately or publicly if it moved forward with persecution of NGOs and INGOs.

-- After the parliamentary elections, we immediately and forcefully should re-engage to hold President Rajapaksa to his promises on reconciliation, the 13th Amendment, and economic development in the north and east.

-- In capitals, governments should encourage Tamil diasporas to renounce separatism and militancy, to find ways to make constructive contributions to economic re-development and political reconciliation, and to engage as far as possible with the GSL.

END SUMMARY.

AMBASSADOR MEETS WITH COLLEAGUES

12. (C) On February 25, Ambassador followed up reftel demarche to select capitals with a meeting with COMs of Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, The Netherlands, Norway, and Switzerland, plus the EU and UN, to discuss the current situation in Sri Lanka and gather thoughts on the way ahead. The meeting began with the Australian high commissioner and French ambassador recounting recent meetings with President Rajapaksa. High Commissioner Klugman -- who accompanied Australian Special Representative for Sri Lanka John McCarthy to see the president -- said he appeared comfortable, relaxed, and positive, saying "all the right things" on such topics as national reconciliation and -- unprompted -- the de-centralizing 13th Amendment, though emphasizing that these processes could only move forward after the April 8 parliamentary elections. He emphasized that economic reconstruction and development would be top priorities: "There can be no peace without development," he said, "and there can be no development without peace." Newly arrived French Ambassador Robichon recounted similar remarks from the president at her recent credentialing ceremony, noting that he also had spoken of de-linking the northern and eastern provinces.

DEEP CONCERNS ABOUT CURRENT SITUATION

13. (C) Despite these relatively positive remarks by the president, the COMs were in full agreement with the assessment of the U.S. demarche to capitals that the

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political situation in Sri Lanka had deteriorated significantly since the presidential election on January 26, as exemplified by the arrest and detention without charges of former opposition candidate Fonseka, the purge from the military of suspected Fonseka supporters, reassignment of hundreds of police officers, intimidation of independent media, and the continued renewal of the repressive Emergency Regulations. COMs were also deeply concerned about the recent announcements by the government that it would be investigating NGOs and INGOs for financial malfeasance and alleged hostility to the government, particularly Transparency International.

WHAT CAN WE EXPECT?

14. (C) COMs -- including those such as Norwegian Ambassador Hattrem with long experience in Sri Lanka -- were unsure whether the recent political crackdown was temporary or indicated a new style of leadership by the Rajapaksa regime. But it did appear that the Rajapaksas were headed in a more authoritarian direction. "The plane seems to be heading for Singapore," EU Ambassador Savage quipped, "but it might land in Burma."

15. (C) COMs said they already had been making many of the same points to the GSL that the U.S. had been making. The question was where to go from here. Hattrem argued for a long-term approach, emphasizing the need to point out to the GSL the importance of a liberal political system for economic growth and prosperity. Klugman agreed firmness on core values was important but stressed that in the shorter term other key topical issues -- such as treatment of IDPs, reconciliation, and development in the north and east -- also must be emphasized.

16. (C) Ambassador Butenis, however, pointed out the difficulty in controlling or moderating the message from our capitals, given that many actors other than foreign ministries were involved. She passed out to the group copies of a recent CSIS report on Sri Lanka advising the West to

accept new realities and think of new approaches, which had been cited in the GSL media and privately to Ambassador by GSL spokesman G.L. Peiris as implying less emphasis on human rights. Moreover, there were some developments -- such as the imminent release of the annual U.S. Human Rights Report -- over which we had no control. On this score, Ambassador also noted that the question of war crimes and accountability now overshadowed all of our dealings with the Rajapaksas.

RECOMMENDATIONS

17. (C) After further discussion, COMs arrived at consensus on a number of steps for the way forward in Colombo and in capitals:

-- We should not expect much progress on issues of importance to us before the parliamentary elections and should refrain from public comment, particularly in the press. The parliamentary election campaign was likely to be more violent and contentious than the presidential election. In this environment, the international community should not appear too eager to engage the Rajapaksa government, which would be taken by the government as countenancing its recent bad behavior.

-- At the same time, we should be prepared to hit the GSL hard privately and publicly if it moved forward with persecution of NGOs and INGOs. As Hattrem noted, attacking Transparency International was tantamount to attacking the

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core democratic values of the West, and it was important to point out to the government in the strongest terms the problems it created for itself by going after such basic institutions. We must tell them categorically, Hattrem summed up COM thinking, "Don't go down that road."

-- After the parliamentary elections on April 8, we immediately and forcefully should re-engage to remind the president of his promises on reconciliation, the 13th Amendment, and re-development in the north and east. The president long has told us to wait until after elections then he would undertake these big projects. We must keep him to these promises.

-- In capitals, it was agreed, governments should engage with the Tamil diasporas to encourage them to renounce separatism and militancy, to find ways to make constructive contributions to economic re-development and political reconciliation, and to engage as far as possible with the GSL. We should also find ways to enlist garment importers and others who do business with Sri Lanka to bring pressure on the GSL to improve its governance and meet GSP-plus targets.

BUTENIS